COURTESY OF PRIME VIDEO

Culture

Donald Glover's *Swarm* Is Another Piece of Fandom Media That Dehumanizes Black Women

If you've ever been in a fandom space — yes, even stan Twitter — the last thing a Black woman gets away with is even the hint of violence or anger.

BY STITCH

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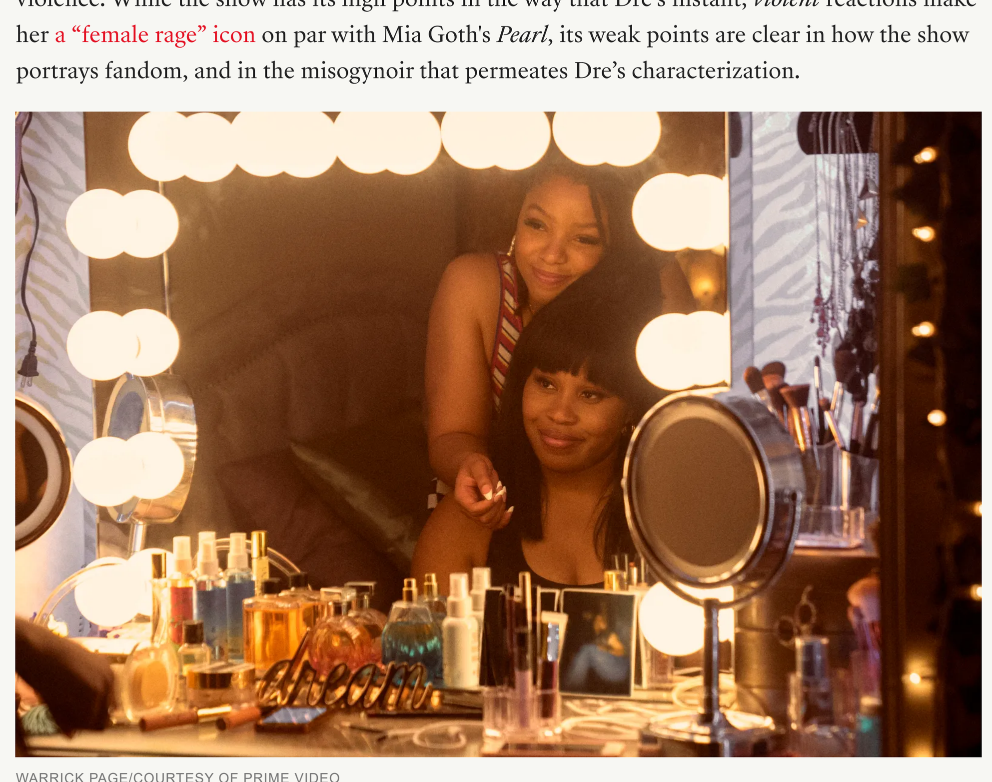
In this op-ed, pop culture and fandom writer Stitch explores Donald Glover's Swarm *and how it portrays fandom and centers Black women. Spoilers ahead.*

What would you do for the love of fandom?

As more eyes turn to analyzing fandom and creating content around the experience of being a fan, more media are focusing on extreme forms of fandom. Gone is the idea of fandom as pure utopia, where people come together to talk about and bond over their interests. Instead, movies, TV, and articles are taking a closer look at the ways fans have become more and more devoted to their fannish objects in ways that risk harming themselves *and* other people.

The premise for *Swarm* — a horror/thriller series(-within-a-series) on Amazon Prime created by Janine Nabers and Donald Glover — is all about the extremes a deep love of fandom can lead vulnerable people to when coupled with severe trauma. The series' main character Dre (Dominique Fishback) is an awkward young Black woman whose love of the fictional pop star Ni'Jah (who Glover and Nabers admit is inspired by Beyoncé) provides her with emotional strength in times of trauma... and gives her confidence that allows her to commit great acts of violence. While the show has its high points in the way that Dre's instant, *violent* reactions make her a "female rage" icon on par with Mia Goth's *Pearl*, its weak points are clear in how the show portrays fandom, and in the misogynoir that permeates Dre's characterization.



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Let's start with the fandom stuff.

All but one of the show's seven episodes — the one set up to look like an episode of *48 Hours* — opens with white text against a black background that reads: "This is not a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is intentional." In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Donald Glover calls the series a "post-truth TV show" that's based on "true events." What are those true events? I can't actually imagine them. The intentionality is obvious, but the combinations of unrelated Actual Persons + Events to paint stan fandoms as exceedingly awful — in ways no other fandom could ever be — is... alarming. Especially because some of the inspirations for what Dre does across the series *aren't* true/actual events done by actual people, they're rumors about things that didn't actually happen. Or they didn't happen the way the show lays the events out. In episode three where Dre bites her idol Ni'Jah? That's something that happened... allegedly between Sanaa Lathan and Beyoncé, not as a result of stan Twitter fandom gone wild. Attributing that behavior to fans on a show with that kind of "everything here is true/has happened" tag before every episode makes it sound as if it's something a fan *has* done. It misrepresents the behaviors and environments in these spaces and gives these fandoms — spaces that can be incredibly toxic in parts — a worse reputation than they have for things they haven't even done.

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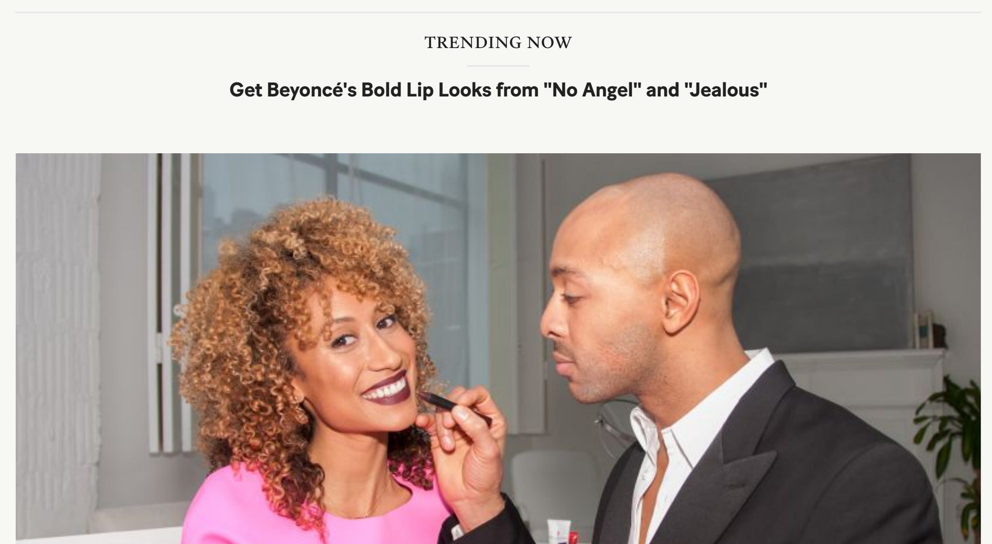

I write about and research the ways that fandom behavior — especially in spaces populated by marginalized fans — can become incredibly toxic and harmful to fans, journalists/critics, and the creators or celebrities responsible for fandom. However, the only major deaths I can think of in (relatively) recent history are Yandere.freak allegedly shooting her friend while drunk, Christina Grimmie's 2016 murder by a man suspected of being an obsessed fan, the double murder-suicide that occurred within Andy Blake's fandom cult. In idol fandoms, there are things like NGT48's Mano Yamaguchi being assaulted by intruders in her home or TVXQ's Yunho being poisoned by an anti-fan back in 2006. This is not to diminish the horror of extreme fandom behaviors, but to point out that when fans act out to anything barely approaching Bataillean extremes of fandom... it's newsworthy. When Barbz go after a pop culture columnist or James Corden has to apologize to the fans of the biggest boy band in the world despite mentioning that he's received death threats from said fans, those things are news. A murder because of fandom? Multiple murders? Those would be *everywhere*.

Heightened reality is part of television, of course, but it's also important to look at which narratives are dramatized like this — and who the eventual portrayal hurts or helps in the long term.

Why focus on a Black woman as the source of fannish violence when we have documented proof of what male sports fans and nerds get up to when they're angry enough? The fact is that while fandoms are increasingly terrible, singling out stan Twitter (and only one version of it at that) to build your "aren't fandoms scary" show around feels... short-sighted. This is not to say that I think any "female focused" fandom is above critique or reproach. I'm the *last* person to have that thought, and I've got articles like this one on weaponized white womanhood in fandom to prove it.

However, as I watched *Swarm*, what stood out to me was the way that the initial press framing the series as "fan(dom) gone wild" a) might have missed the point of this show about a traumatized Black woman giving into rage, trauma, and desperation and b) ignores the ways that fandom *as a whole* inspires people to some level of extreme behavior in order to center what they love the most.

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Black women in fandom have always been underrepresented, if not outright erased. Even though there's nothing about us that is less fannish than anyone else, our contributions to and existence within the fandom spaces we've always been in have been erased and ignored. The only times when Black women are acknowledged as being part of fandoms are in situations where the fandom in question is incredibly toxic or our identities are used against other people to validate a stance. In the fandoms for Black women celebrities like Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and the fictional Ni'Jah, Black women make up the majority of the fanbases. And unfortunately... stan Twitter has a reputation for toxicity and digital violence. Fellow fans, people viewed as anti-fans, journalists, critics, and even celebrities themselves — including the fandom object — can all come under fire from stans upset at the way that their celebrity of choice is being perceived. But the aggression rarely if ever makes it off of these mean Twitter streets; although doxxing and dogpiling are increasingly common, for the most part it hasn't escalated to the point of any of the violence that we see onscreen in *Swarm*.

Even though *Swarm* is an incredibly well shot, beautifully acted television show, its decision to center the narrative on a frenzied Black woman fan feels both unrealistic and unfair. It feels as though the character is being assigned this history and behavior set that doesn't mesh with what Black women's fandom, even stan fandom, looks like. It doesn't help that despite the Black women working on the show at every angle, Donald Glover's misogynoir shines through.

In a recent *Vulture* interview, Glover said that he told Fishback not to find the humanity in her character and to, "Think of it more like an animal and less like a person." If that's how you're thinking of your Black female character and how you urge her performer to act, that explains the shape of the series. In the same piece, co-creator Janine Nabers compares Dre to Scarlett Johansson's alien character in *Under the Skin*. For both, Dre's humanity isn't the point, and they don't see it as present. They *want* the watching audience to do the work of humanizing Dre, not the actors. The only problem? That's not how fandom reacts to Black female characters. That's not how a lot of people react to Black women *period*.

As I watch and rewatch the show, I keep thinking about the "whys" behind it. Why fandom? Why Black women? Why Dre? Why the endless Beyoncé references? I know that part of the goal is to show Black women as something they've never been shown as before in pop culture — as gratuitous, gory, violent killers. Some of Nabers's commentary about the show makes it clear that she thinks that Dre is supposed to be empowering in some way, describing Dre ("the character I wanted to write for a long time") to *Vulture* as "so profoundly settled in her ideology, gives zero f*cks, and is going to get the job done."

In this same *Vulture* interview, Nabers insists that despite Dre's actions, "this is a love letter to Black women." I don't understand how. *Swarm* doesn't validate Dre's rage or effectively delve into her trauma to make her scary but sympathetic. It doesn't give Black women an "unhinged" character that's validated or justified by the narrative the way unhinged white characters often are. On top of that, it turns a tight, biased lens on a fictionalized version of Beyoncé's fanbase, one that we *know* is heavily populated by Black women and other marginalized Black people.

A lot of the pushback against criticism of *Swarm* centers around the fact that the show has Black women behind and in front of the camera. Nabers even says it herself in the *Vulture* interview when journalist Sam Sanders brings up how an immediate response to *Swarm* will be "Donald Glover hates Black women." In response, Nabers says "it's silly to say that" because Glover hired her, he hired and cast other Black women, and this is a show about Black women. Except... that doesn't mean the misogynoir has left the building. Misogynists work with women all the time. Donald Glover, who has a pretty public history of being very weird about Black women, works with Black women. That doesn't mean that he likes, understands, or respects them, and hiring a few isn't actually enough to undo or distract from the way Dre is portrayed in this show *or* how Glover has talked about her.

QUANTRELL D. COLBERT/COURTESY OF PRIME VIDEO

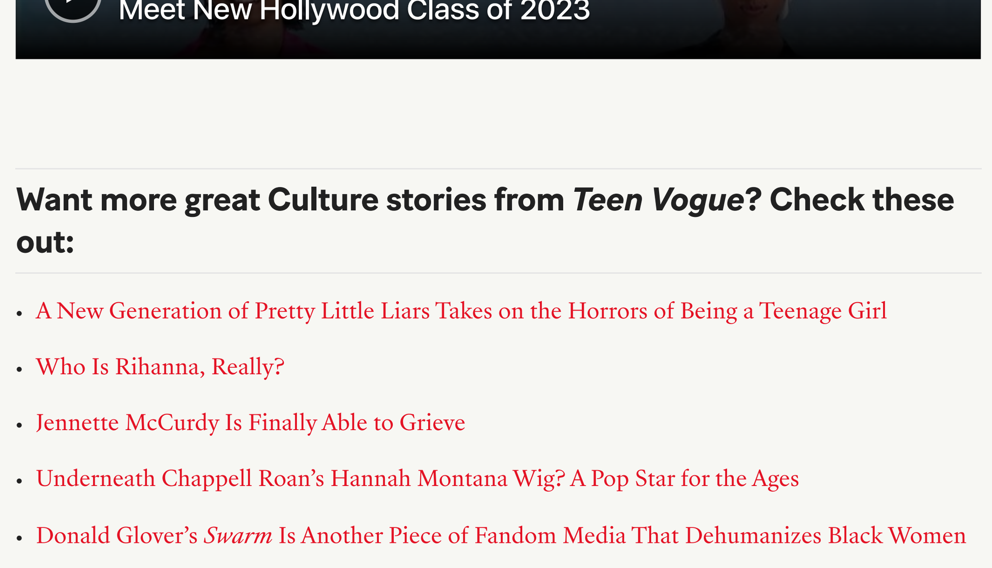
Ultimately, *Swarm* is a lot like what I think HBO's *The Idol* will be like: an external POV about something the creators don't really have direct interest in or understanding of. There are incredible moments across this show that had me on the edge of my seat, true, but there's something about the show's portrayal of Dre that is unsettling beyond her brutality. Co-creator Nabers keeps bringing up how underrepresented Black women are in the serial killer game (the idea that they've "fallen through the cracks" is present in that episode with the true crime bent).

However, there's a huge difference there. For one thing: there's no accounting for misogynoir across this work. People left *You* thirsting after Penn Badgley's character to the point where he had to tell them to chill out. Real life white male serial killers become thirst objects for the darker parts of true crime fandom. Black women — real and otherwise — aren't assigned even a tenth of the humanity and desirability that these white men are... even before the serial killer thing comes into play.

I went into *Swarm* expecting something like Satoshi Kon's film adaptation of *Perfect Blue* or Rin Usami's *Idol, Burning*... work that understands the extremes fans go to and humanizes them in the process of exploring how fandom shapes their actions. Despite the promise of the first two episodes, I ended my time with the series thinking "Wow, these folks really don't *get* fandom, huh." And that's mostly because of the way they claim Dre's violence, fueled by fandom, is glossed over *because* of her Black womanhood. If you've ever been in a fandom space — yes, even stan Twitter — the last thing a Black woman gets away with is even the *hint* of violence or anger.

Black women aren't allowed the "luxury" of violence. We're not allowed the empathy offered to people who actually harm others, so why would we be allowed to hurt people over *fandom* of all things? While I got a kick out of Dre being able to do something I couldn't — I can't even curse about people trying to get me fired over my work on fandom without being accused of abuse — it rang hollow because I know how Dre would be treated not just in her fandom, but in her life.

A world that doesn't take care of Black women when they're *good* sure as hell wouldn't miss the chance to punish one for committing serial murders across the country. The fantasy falls flat.



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